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AT LAST.

WRITTEN FOR THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, BY GYPSY WILDE.

Oh, eyes, and eyes, that long have watched
A faint and far-off vision,
Hear you your first sight at last
Upon a real Elysian.

Oh, head, that day and night has throbb'd
With a weary burning pain;
Dost prove a drowsy pillow now,
Within a beautiful brain?

Oh, heart, that all these years has borne
Thy crushing weight of sorrow;
Dost see the crescent promise set
Of a golden glad to-morrow?

Poor weary hands, that all this while
Have held a phantom treasure;
Dost clasp at last, close to thy heart,
A real and lasting pleasure?

Oh, feet, that long have trod
A rugged, tortuous way;
Hast crossed so late, the border-line
To a royal golden highway?

Oh, life so chequered, life of pain,
Oh, life so strangely crossed;
No more alone on a wide, deep sea,
No more 'mid wild waves tossed.

Oh, soul be glad, the goal is won—
The day hath for thee broken;
See glorious bliss in thy cloud-sky set,
A reign of peace the token.

THE CHILTON ESTATE; OR, Close Play for a Fortune.

WRITTEN FOR THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, BY RETT WINWOOD.

AUTHOR OF "A BLACK SHEEP IN THE FOLD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STRANGE WOMAN.

There was a brief silence in the room. Claudia looked distressed, and more than half frightened. In an instant Mrs. Chilton's words came back to her mind.

"Were they true, I wonder?" she whispered softly to herself. "Is Hetty the dejected creature my aunt would fain make me believe?"

Hetty's sudden burst of emotion had given a momentary coloring to Mrs. Chilton's story.

And it was only momentary. Claudia gazed into the girl's sweet face, now convulsed with bitter grief and remorse, but was unable to read any sign of madness there.

"My sweet sister," she cried, hugging her closely in her arms, all woman and so all tenderness, "why do you talk so wildly? Why are you unworthy to be my friend?"

Hetty shook her head and shuddered. "I cannot tell you," she moaned. "Please don't ask me."

She tore herself out of those clinging arms, and glided two or three times up and down the floor, wringing her hands.

At last Claudia stopped her. "I don't understand why you are so disturbed," she said. "But I will not ask you until you are free to explain. I only wish to love you, and do you good."

Hetty caught her hand, covering it with kisses and tears.

"You have done me good," she cried. "You are good to me—ten thousand times better than I deserve."

Then she glanced quickly and almost defiantly toward the door, and raised her voice to a louder pitch.

"No matter what may come of it. I will never, never, never do ought to harm you, so help me Heaven!"

She spoke with almost savage vehemence, regardless of the eyes which Mr. Chilton might have placed within reach of her voice. Indeed she took a sort of pleasure in this defiance.

Of course Claudia could not comprehend this outburst. She stared a little, and looked puzzled.

"Pray calm yourself," she entreated. "You frighten me with such speeches."

"Do I?"

"Yes. I don't know what I should suspect if I were at all imaginative," Claudia laughed lightly. "But I am not. I only fear that you are needlessly distressing yourself. Come, draw up your chair to this window. Let us forget everything that is disagreeable, and have a pleasant little chat together."

Hetty found it very hard, but she nerved herself to the ordeal before her. For Claudia's sake she shook off the overpowering sense of danger that had stupified her, and endeavored to be easy and natural.

The day and the night passed. Hetty and Claudia breakfasted together the next morning—and immediately afterward descended the stairs for a ramble in the grounds.

They were passing out upon the terrace when Mrs. Chilton appeared, and called Hetty back.

"Oh, course you understand," she said, quietly, fastening her eyes upon the girl's face, "that your liberty is restricted?"

"It does not surprise me in the least to learn that it is," Hetty returned, with spirit. "Humph. I should hope not."

Hetty turned impatiently away.

"How far can we go?"

"Anywhere within the grounds. But you are, on no account, to pass the gates."

A flush of anger and shame swept over the girl's face. Was she a dog, to yield passively to this woman's will?

Mrs. Chilton quickly detected her emotion.

"Go," she said, sharply. "My niece is waiting for you. But remember that the eyes of those who are paid to be faithful, are continually upon you."

"Shall I say to Claudia what you have just said to me?"

"If you dare," and her teeth clicked sharply together. "You are a provoking little fool! Now go. I have said quite enough."

With those words Hetty moved on to join Claudia again—and the two girls were soon traversing the garden-walks.

The grounds were not large, nor very carefully kept. A good deal of shrubbery abounded in different portions, making it quite a secluded retreat.

They had penetrated this shrubbery when they heard footsteps and a voice. The voice was crooning a low ditty, very softly and very pathetically. It ceased suddenly, and a woman's figure stood before them.

She was quite an old woman, and was dressed in shabby black. She had a pale, thin, careworn face, and great, scared-looking eyes. Thin bands of gray hair were drawn back under the black straw bonnet she had on.

It was a peculiar figure, to say the least. But stranger than anything else, was the sudden agitation that seized upon her the instant her startled gaze rested upon the girlish figures before her.

She stopped short, and for a few awful seconds almost ceased to breathe. Her hands trembled, and her wild eyes dilated more and more, as if positively starting from their sockets. Then a half-suppressed scream broke from her pallid lips.

She stood palpitating and trembling, as if she had seen a ghost. A deadly horror seemed to throb at her heart and creep among the roots of her hair.

After that first shrill exclamation, she struggled some seconds before she could again command her voice. Speech seemed suddenly to have been denied her.

But at last her quivering lips shaped themselves once more. She took one step nearer to the girls and stopped again.

"Who are you?" she gasped, in a strange, hoarse voice.

Neither Claudia nor Hetty answered this peremptory question. They could only stare at each other in mute wonder.

The poor creature waited a moment, and then began to wring her hands with an hysterical movement. "Am I mad?" she muttered to herself. "Do I see visions? Good God, what does it all mean? Why are there two of them—two, and so like?"

She turned and clutched fiercely hold of Hetty's arm.

"I want to know which of you two is Claudia Chilton," she screamed, shrilly. "I want to know! I must know! I will know!"

Her vehemence was really frightful. Hetty shrank away from her, very pale and somewhat panic-stricken. But she immediately made answer that her companion's name was Claudia Chilton.

The old woman glanced eagerly from one girlish face to the other. She still trembled and looked distressed.

"So like—so like!" she said, under her breath. Then she stole swiftly to Hetty's side again.

"Who are you?" she cried, in a voice of sharp suspicion. "You have not told me your name!"

"Hetty Deane!"

"Bah. I know better. What do you mean by trying to deceive me? What do you mean by giving me a name that is palpably false?"

"I have given you the only name by which I was ever called."

The strange woman looked up quickly and eagerly.

"Yes, yes," she muttered. "I am sure of that. But you have another name. Tell it to me."

"I know none other," Hetty replied, impatiently.

A perplexed, dissatisfied expression flitted over the woman's face. She was about to say more, but voices sounded near at hand, and footsteps were heard to approach.

"Hush!" she whispered, raising a warning finger. "You are watched, and they must not see us together."

She had turned to dart into the shrubbery

when Claudia, alarmed by her last words, and more, perhaps, by the manner in which they were uttered, caught eagerly hold of her black dress.

"What do you mean by saying that we are watched?" she demanded.

"Hush! Nothing, nothing! Let me go!"

"You shall tell me!" cried Claudia, loudly, for anxiety and wonder had given her a strange sort of courage. "You shall tell me!"

"Hush! Not now. They are right upon us. I must go!"

She shook off Claudia's detaining hand, sent one quick, anxious glance all around, then slid into the dark depths of the shrubbery and disappeared.

Hetty was more unnerved by this meeting than she would have cared to confess. She felt that there was something mysterious in the whole affair. But prudence told her that if she wished to learn more in the future, she must be very careful of her present actions.

"Come," she said, in tones unnaturally clear and calm. "Let us go on."

She slid her arm about Claudia's waist, and fairly dragged her into the path again. The footsteps they had heard were now close upon them, and there was no moment to lose.

"Where are we going?" asked Claudia.

"Wherever you like. Back to the house again!"

"Oh, no, no," quickly and nervously. "I can't go back just yet. I don't like to think of going back."

She was giving way to the first nervousness she had yet manifested. Hetty trembled as she observed this fact. "Oh, God," she secretly prayed, "keep her ignorant of her peril a little longer."

The instant Claudia knew the truth, there must be open war between her and Mr. Chilton. Hetty well might tremble, realizing this fact.

"Since you wish it, we will continue our ramble," she said, in a voice that was kept steady by a powerful effort of the will.

An abrupt exclamation from her companion caused her to turn at this instant. Claudia's finger was raised, and she was pointing down the walk.

"See!" she whispered, sharply. "There's a man hiding in those bushes yonder!"

Hetty caught a brief glimpse of a dark, swarthy face, which was immediately withdrawn. Then she remembered that the footsteps she had heard had ceased near that point.

(Of course this man was one of Mr. Chilton's spies.)

Had he seen the woman in black? Had he heard what she had said to them? It was impossible to tell. In any event it would be well to leave that vicinity as quickly as possible.

"Don't be frightened," she said, trying to speak reassuringly. "It was one of the servants you saw, of course."

Claudia shivered, looking very pale indeed. "You saw him?" she demanded, eagerly.

"Yes," was the somewhat reluctant answer.

"Did it look like a servant's face? No, no! It was wicked, wolfish, vile! No man in his senses would keep the possessor of such a face in his service."

"Your imagination has distorted its expression, perhaps."

"No, no. It was fearfully malignant. The sight of it has filled me with horror. Come, let us hurry away from this fearful spot."

This was exactly what Hetty was wishing to do. She was glad that the proposition had, this time, come from Claudia, herself.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ADVENTURE.

The two young ladies moved nearer to the house. But Claudia's agitation was not easily subdued. She still continued to pant and tremble.

"Hush!" she whispered, raising a warning finger. "You are watched, and they must not see us together."

She cried, at last, with sudden vehemence, "We are watched."

"Watched?" echoed Hetty.

"Yes. Why else was that evil-faced man lurking in the shrubbery? I saw how earnestly his eyes were bent upon us. What did it mean, if he was not a spy sent to dog our footsteps?"

Hetty changed color. For one instant the truth trembled upon her lips. But, for the girl's own sake, she thrust it back.

"How strangely you talk, dear," she forced a laugh. "Whom do you suspect of watching our movements?"

Claudia slowly shook her head.

"Nobody," she reluctantly admitted. "That is what puzzles me. I don't know why anybody should surround us with spies. And yet somehow this conviction forced itself upon my mind."

"That woman's words must have put it there."

"They did—her words, and what I saw with my own eyes. Look at me, Hetty. I'm shaking from head to foot. Why is it? Why can't I banish that haunting fear from my mind? Why did it establish itself so firmly there at all?"

The sight of that white, pleading face was more than Hetty could bear. Her unnatural fortitude gave way. She caught Claudia in her arms, and kissed her over and over again, and wept on her bosom.

"God keep you!" she sobbed. "God help you."

Then she struggled hard for her lost self-possession, and found it again.

"What a silly goose I am," she said, drying her eyes. "But then I love you so dearly—so very dearly! You are the first real friend I ever had. I cannot bear to see you in trouble or anxiety of any sort."

A strange, vivid light had come into her eyes while speaking. She had seen that the path they had taken was leading them direct to the gate opening upon the high-road, and that this gate was standing wide open.

Could she pass it with her companion? On the other side lay liberty and life—two blessings worth a struggle.

She glanced quickly up and down the path, and in the direction of the house. Not one of Mr. Chilton's spies was in sight, so far as she could tell. Her heart beat fearfully loud; she scarcely breathed. But, though dreadfully agitated, she dared not let Claudia know the thoughts that were passing in her mind.

Should she venture?

She breathed a quick prayer for direction to God. The sharp thud of horses' hoofs in the high-road decided her. She caught Claudia's hand tightly in her own, and said, "Shall we walk outside the grounds?" she asked, in a whisper.

"Yes. I'd like it very much."

Another wordless prayer, and Hetty pushed straight ahead toward the gate, that now seemed like the entrance way to Paradise.

She had nearly reached it, with Claudia clinging to her like some trusting child. Then, of a sudden, a cry and a howl sounded in the distance. The cry was echoed nearer at hand, and two dark figures rose up on either side of the path straight toward them.

Hetty stopped short, with a moan of despair. What a fool she had been to imagine that the gate had been left unguarded!

A second howl and a whistling sound caused her to turn her head and look back. A large, brutal-looking bloodhound was rushing down the path straight toward the point where she and Claudia were standing.

A scream of horror burst from her lips. "Oh, God save us!" she shrieked, and started to run, dragging Claudia along with her.

For one moment her horror of the frightful beast overcame every other feeling. Obeying a natural impulse, she dashed up to the gate where the two men were standing.

The bloodhound overtook her at almost the same second. She caught the glare of his fiery eyes, and saw him give a final snarl. Then she dropped her head on Claudia's neck, expecting to feel his teeth in her arm the next instant.

But she did not. The sharp report of a pistol rung on the air. A single howl of

fury and agony sounded in her ear, and then all was deathly still.

At last she ventured to look up. The savage beast lay on the ground at her feet, dead!

Who had saved her and Claudia from its fury? The men at the gate? No; they stood like two statues, utterly stupefied by what had happened.

She glanced beyond them. There, on a powerful horse, sat a dark, handsome man of about thirty. In one hand he held a pistol, still smoking from the recent discharge. His dark, eloquent eyes were bent upon Hetty in an earnest look of interest and wonder.

"I do not know," she faltered. Another instant, and the gentleman had slid from the back of his horse and was standing by her side.

"Are you hurt?" he asked in a low, but very anxious voice.

Hetty shook her head.

"Only frightened?" The beast was furious. What caused him to attack you in that manner?"

Hetty felt that all his remarks were addressed to herself. At last she found voice in which to frame a reply.

"I do not know," she faltered.

"He gave me a dreadful fright," shivered Claudia. "I know he would have torn us to pieces but for your timely assistance."

He had a reason for this. Determined footsteps were coming up the steps, and he knew that Gerald Raymond was coming back.

Controlling the expression of his features by a powerful effort, he swung wide the door, and said, "Did you hear the screams of that poor creature?" he said, meeting Raymond's face to face on the threshold. "Dreadful, isn't it?"

Raymond looked at him keenly and half-distrustfully.

"I heard somebody cry out for help, or at least thought I did."

"It was the young girl whom my niece has engaged for a companion," Mr. Chilton returned, very gravely. "She was with her in the grounds just now. The danger through which she has passed made her hysterical."

"Can I see her?"

"She is now unconscious. Yonder she lies in my wife's arms. Certainly, sir, come in and look at her if you desire."

Raymond hesitated. He could see Hetty's white, stiff face from where he stood. She was indeed in a dead faint.

"I will not intrude at such a time," he said, reluctantly. "I beg your pardon for having come back at all."

"No apologies, I beg," cried Mr. Chilton, glibly. "I would have come back in your place. But we are used to these hysterical fits of the girls, and do not mind them much. To be frank with you, sir, she is not right here," and he tapped his forehead significantly.

"Not crazy?" cried Raymond, in a voice of horror.

"No, that would be saying too much, for she is never more violent than she was just now. Her nervous system must be very much shattered, I think. That is all. Good-morning, sir, and thanks, a thousand thanks for the interest you manifest in my household."

He bowed and smiled so blandly that Gerald Raymond could not tell whether these last words were intended to be sarcastic or not.

"Good-morning," he said, in answer, and went away.

Mr. Chilton closed the door softly and quickly behind him. "You have heard all," he said, looking hard at Claudia, who was leaning white and still against the wall. "Did I do right in sending him away so summarily?"

"I don't know," she faltered, in a scared voice.

"Poor Hetty!" he went on, commiseratingly. "I was sorry to make her manifestly so public. But I have spared her all I could—even making myself liable to the charge of being inhospitable."

a ringing in her ears. Her voice failed her. Only by a powerful effort did she keep herself from fainting outright.

Mr. Chilton pushed on and on, toward the house. Hetty was almost a dead weight in his arms, but he did not seem to mind that. He was only anxious to get her away from the stranger's sight before any disagreeable discovery had been made.

"Poor dears! poor dears!" he kept murmuring. "You have had a terrible fright. I am so sorry."

At last they reached the hall steps. Here the stranger paused.

"Let me detain you for a single word," he said. "My name is Gerald Raymond. I have a villa between this and New York. Will you grant me the privilege of calling soon to inquire after the young ladies?"

"Certainly, certainly, sir," replied Mr. Chilton, with a ready smile. "Come as soon as you please, and as often."

"Thank you."

The words were for Mr. Chilton, but his eyes were fixed upon Hetty's convulsed face. Something in its expression seemed both to interest and perplex him. It was full of agonized entreaty and distress.

"Is there nothing more I can do to serve you?" he asked, still regarding the young girl.

"Nothing," returned Mr. Chilton, hastily. "Good-morning, sir."

He pushed Hetty almost roughly up the steps as he spoke. At the moment she had no strength to resist, no strength to cry out. The hall-door closed with a clang. It sounded to Hetty like the door of a tomb. A momentary flash of courage came back to her. She tore herself free from Mr. Chilton's hold, and flung herself wildly against the door.

"Save me!" she cried, in accents of frantic appeal.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEW TIGHTEN.

Hetty's scream for help was the last effort of a desperate woman.

She had seen Gerald Raymond turn slowly to go away. That was too much for human endurance. It seemed as if her very life would go with him. Unknown horrors loomed darkly before her. She saw a thousand peril-like one in a dream-threatening Claudia and herself.

She beat madly upon the door with her fists. "Lost, lost!" she moaned. "For the love of Heaven, come back! Come back, and save me!"

Her voice rose to a shriek. She beat loud and more loudly upon the door. The strength of despair was in her arms.

Mr. Chilton sprang suddenly upon her. There was a very brief struggle. Then he caught hold of her wrists and held them in a vice-like grip.

"You d—d fool!" he hissed savagely.

Hetty saw his wicked face bent close to her own. She felt his hot breath on her cheek. Then the deadly faintness against which she had once struggled successfully, again beset her. This time she had no strength to ward it off. She drew a quick, gasping breath, and fainted dead away.

Mr. Chilton looked relieved. His wife had come gliding into the hall while the struggle was going on. He quickly yielded up the unconscious girl to her care.

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"Poor Hetty!" he went on, commiseratingly. "I was sorry to make her manifestly so public. But I have spared her all I could—even making myself liable to the charge of being inhospitable."

After Calby had gone, Louis arose, came up to Katie, took her hand and gazed for a moment into her eyes, then said, as he

the company were driving furiously in all directions, in order to recover the bride, but their party might not be entirely the

er, for here was something more attractive than the "bewitching dances." One of the young men raised Carlyle's head, several

to the detection of the parties guilty of
an attempt to throw a train from their
tracks.

"I shall never take this ring off," I faltered, locking my fingers tightly together, never. I promised I never would. Do

he crossed the beams on the cart-road be-
side the trees, I could follow him, being
myself in safety. But though I sped rapidly
into the wood—my eyes aching and

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